

Feds deny protection to California longfin smelt

mweiser@sacbee.com

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Wednesday announced that the longfin smelt, a fish native to the Delta, does not warrant Endangered Species Act protection.

The agency said there is inadequate evidence that the longfin is genetically distinct from other fish of its kind. But it is launching a status review of the species to find out.

Environmental groups petitioned the service in 2007 to protect the 5-inch longfin, which is in steep decline in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta along with eight other fish species.

The longfin is slightly larger than the Delta smelt, already listed as threatened under federal law. It is also known to venture into the Pacific Ocean, unlike the Delta smelt, which spends its entire life in the Sacramento-San Joaquin estuary. Both are considered important indicators of ecosystem health.

Wildlife Service spokesman Al Donner said biologists know the longfin drifts north on ocean currents as far as Alaska and may breed with other longfin populations. But no one knows if the Delta's longfin ever return or whether they are genetically unique, he said.

Only one genetic study has been done on the populations, Donner said. It dates to 1995, and examined a lake-bound longfin population in Washington state, not one that ventures into the ocean.

"There is limited information on the species, and that is part of the problem," he said.

Tina Swanson, executive director of the Bay Institute, called the decision "extremely frustrating."

The Endangered Species Act, she said, simply requires officials to heed the "best available science" in a listing decision. Since there is no proof other longfin populations are genetically identical, and since California's population is clearly at risk, she said the service should have moved to protect it.

"They've found an excuse for not protecting the species, despite the clear need to do so," Swanson said.

Her group filed the listing petition with the Center for Biological Diversity and Natural Resources Defense Council.

The California Department of Fish and Game has monitored the longfin since 1967 using annual trawl-net surveys. The longfin's numbers have always been variable, but its decline since 2000

has been longer and more severe than ever.

The species set a historic population low in 2007 and rebounded slightly last year, but remains well below its average.

In March, the California Fish and Game Commission saw enough trouble to list the species as "threatened" under the state Endangered Species Act. It also imposed limits on state and federal water diversion pumps in the Delta to protect the species – similar to those already in place for the Delta smelt.

These rules will remain in place, as the state and federal laws are distinct.

Call The Bee's Matt Weiser, (916) 321-1264.
